

# DISEASE IS GOOD FOR YOU

by

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We have all been conditioned over the years by every form of audiovisual aid to believe that Guinness is good for you, and indeed we see an extensive field trial of this beverage being carried out daily by many of our friends, and so it may seem somewhat of a paradox to find a paper entitled 'Disease is Good for You'. I, however, would like to support the unorthodox idea and show that some diseases that afflict mankind can be beneficial. I shall endeavour, for example, to show that the world was a more exciting place with more originality when the bacillus of tuberculosis and the spirochaete of syphilis were given free range. We must ask ourselves if the easy and rapid and effective treatment of tuberculosis and syphilis, which in the case of the latter disease has prevented that late, interesting and stimulating complication known as general paralysis of the insane (G.P.I.), has made the world a less exciting place in which to live. Is the absence of these diseases the cause of so much mediocrity among artists, politicians, and leaders in business and society? They no longer display the flair and originality they used to have. They are a pedestrian group playing for safety rather than success.

Perhaps my title is too broad. Certain diseases must be excluded – the incurable diseases, the painful ones, the debilitating ones, all of which make a man an introvert rather than outward looking. In this connection I must mention an occasion when some years ago I was talking to Sir Stanford Cade – London's leading cancer expert at that time. He produced from his pocket photographs of two politicians who had come under his care. One of these he pointed out to me was a British Prime Minister of Ulster descent, who, he said, although involved in major political problems probably had as his main personal worry and anxiety whether he would be able to swallow his own saliva; it will be remembered that Bonar Law at that time was suffering from a cancer of the throat. The other picture was that of Neville Chamberlain holding a famous piece of paper in his hand with a promise of 'peace in our time', and yet, said Cade, Chamberlain was probably more worried as to whether his colostomy would suddenly act at the wrong moment. Cade had operated on him not long before for a cancer of the rectum. Anthony Eden never knew when his cholangitis with high fever would confine him to bed just at a critical moment when he was faced with an important international decision.

A book has just recently been published in Switzerland describing in detail the ill health of many of the great world leaders – e.g., Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini: there are many similar examples and there will always be the problem of when one's health and one's ability to do the job come into conflict. Who is to tell the doctor, for example, when he is no longer capable? The

decision cannot be left to the individual but to the clear impartial judgement of friends. In politics and in medicine more than in any other walk of life is there the necessity of *mens sana in corpore sano*.

Every man has two separate parts in his make up, one is the artistic side and the other the scientific, mathematical, computer side. It is the artistic side only that can be involved and stimulated by tuberculosis and syphilis. We cannot see the computer being involved or affected by either. In the extensive literature on the subject we find few bank directors, business tycoons, atom splitters, or professors of mathematics mentioned as having gained anything from these diseases. In medicine the skill of diagnosis and the care and treatment of the sick patient are a combination of art and science. The average doctor is vain enough to think he has in his own make up these two ingredients in the right proportion.

### TUBERCULOSIS AND GENIUS

Moorman (1939) gave a long list of people, mostly writers, poets, musicians, sculptors and painters (Appendix 1) to support the views expressed in such quotations as 'The best recipe for producing the highest type of creative mind is an initial spark of genius plus tuberculosis', or 'The decline in tuberculosis coincides with the decline in creative writing' or 'By way of compensation for good health we may have to forego the pleasure of certain cultural joys'. Ebstein (1932), too, maintained that tuberculosis does not cause genius but may fan into flames a dormant spark.

Moorman suggested that we all have a dual personality. One part is conventional and restricted by established habits and customs; the other part, which, although held in check, can with the right stimulus be released to show the person's real ego. The stimulus may be alcohol, tuberculosis, or syphilis. He described in detail the lives of R. L. Stevenson, Schiller, Voltaire, Molière, Shelley, Keats, St. Francis of Assisi, Marie Bashkirsteff (The Russian child Prodigy), Katherine Mansfield (The New Zealand novelist), and of Francis Thompson, of Preston, who wrote 'The Hound of Heaven' said by some to be the greatest ode in the English language. He was able to list 80 others all of whom added much to the artistic side of British culture. In his book on much the same subject Ebstein (1932) went far back into history ending up with Klabund in 1928. He gives short notes of each of his 133 cases and covers a vast field – Russia, Germany, France, including such well known names as Chopin, Paul Ehrlich, Goethe, Gorski, Laënnec, Rousseau, Schiller, Attila (King of the Huns), Fontaine (of the fables), Goldsmith, Washington Irving, D. H. Lawrence, Rudolf Wagner and many others. Both of these books were published before 1945, and before tuberculosis started to disappear. Penicillin, a forerunner of streptomycin, had just been introduced a few years earlier.

It was said of Tom Hood that as his health declined from tuberculosis his poetical fire seemed to burn more brightly. 'The Song of the Shirt' came from a man on his death bed. Chopin created his greatest masterpieces when his tuberculosis was most active. Aubrey Beardsley knew he was doomed and so

with feverish energy he tried to put a lifetime into each twelve months. Keats obviously felt that time was running out when he wrote – ‘When I have fears that I may cease to be before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain’. He clearly hoped to have time to put on paper all the ideas that were filling his brain at the moment. The idea of haste is often mentioned but the work that actually has been produced rarely shows any signs of rush or hurry.

When Ernest Henley wrote in ‘Invictus’

*It matters not how strait the Gate  
How charged with punishment the scroll  
I am the master of my fate  
I am the captain of my soul.*

he had had one leg amputated because of tuberculosis and his lungs were now affected. With the spread of the disease to his other leg he went to Edinburgh on crutches to see Sir Joseph Lister who was ushering in the dawn of antiseptic surgery with his carbolic acid treatment. Fortunately after two years in hospital he was discharged a relatively fit man. During this time he wrote his well known poem ‘In Hospital’ and also made close contact with another consumptive Robert Louis Stevenson. Stevenson was able to produce many works of literary genius which still delight us, right up to the moment when he finally succumbed to the disease in Samoa. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was long confined to bed with tuberculosis of the spine, and yet was able to share one of the most romantic marriages of all time. Her husband Robert once said of her ‘She has a soul of fire in a shell of pearl’, and later when she was dying of tuberculosis he wrote ‘As the disease advances it gives its victims ever increasing beauty; passion is increased; desire more elegant; and finally a wonderful happiness, an ecstasy of hope and confidence – all will be well soon – and then the brief candle is blown out’. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote one of her own poems to George Sand whom she greatly admired, and it was the latter who nursed that master of music Frederick Chopin until his death at the early age of 39.

In a useful paper on Chekov and his chronic tuberculosis the late Dr. Brice Clarke of Belfast gives the interesting history of the life of this Russian doctor and writer who, when he coughed up some blood for the first time exclaimed ‘this is the visiting card of tuberculosis’. He survived it for many years. He was at his very lowest ebb when he wrote ‘The Cherry Orchard’, but when this play was produced for the first time in the theatre in 1904 he himself appeared on the stage and received a tremendous ovation. He died a few months later.

The Brontë family present a good example of eccentricity and of disease and genius. They were riddled with tuberculosis. Although their father coughed on with his ‘chronic bronchitis’ until the age of 84; Anne died at the age of 29, Emily at 30, and Charlotte at 39. The two last named displayed great literary talent. Their brother Branwell too was tuberculous and whilst having no literary ability whatsoever, was a painter of some merit.

Bochaelli (1960) showed that doctors suffering from tuberculosis have themselves been pioneers in advances in the treatment of the disease. In this context

he mentioned the work of Dett Weller, Paul Ehrlich, Koch, Karl Turbân, Parrot and Cornet. One can trace all the advances prior to the discovery of specific chemotherapy in their published papers. Turbân was the first to perform a thoracoplasty by rib resection. Tuberculin was discovered by Koch and self administered when he discovered that he himself had tuberculosis. Laënnec is always remembered as the inventor of the stethoscope but he himself died very early from tuberculosis.

## OTHER CAUSES OF GENIUS

Other causes of genius have been advanced. My friend Sir George Pickering, until recently Regius Professor Medicine at Oxford, wrote 'Creative Malady' a book which I greatly enjoyed because I disagreed with most of it. He tried to establish that often genius has resulted from the presence of psychoneurosis – and it was this that created the urge to do something. He analysed the life and life cycle of several well known people – Charles Darwin, Florence Nightingale, Mary Baker Eddy, Sigmund Freud, Marcel Proust and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. He maintained that illness may be an evil episode but occasionally it can be of benefit not only to the victim but to society. The psychoneurotic is able to escape into privacy; in fact he himself was forced to go to bed on account of a pain in his hips caused by advanced osteoarthritis. He thus had time for thought, reflection, and writing. Now since he has had a successful hip joint replacement and is free from pain he has lost the excuse for solitude. He pointed out what we all know, that creative works usually appear unsought in periods of leisure. Newton was in his garden when the apple fell; Archimedes was in his bath. Poincaré was just putting his foot on a bus, and Darwin was in his carriage and in fact could remember the very spot on the road where he suddenly discovered with great joy his solution to the problem of evolution, even though it took him another twenty years to complete his work on the subject. These and many other discoveries, the result of so called serenity, all appeared when the mind was at rest.

The mind like the heart has two phases, a systole and a diastole. When at work it is cut off from thought but when it is at rest the big ideas appear. How many of us at school were unable to answer the examination paper at the critical moment but saw all the answers clearly when in our bath or going to bed? An alternative to illness for some people was prison, where Bunyan, Bertrand Russell and others did such valuable work. Some like Milton found peace in blindness. Pickering in his list of psychoneurotics includes Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science. When she died in 1910 she was one of the richest women of the day, and yet for years had had to be carried up and down stairs. At the end she was a frail elderly old woman pursued by terrors of persecution. She survived, however, three husbands, and died at the age of 89. So psychoneurosis has obviously something to be said in its favour. Sigmund Freud developed the idea and technique of psycho-analysis in 1892; he tried to oversimplify the problem in relating nearly everything to sex and the oedipus

complex. He said on one occasion – ‘I cannot be industrious when I am in good health. On the contrary I need a certain degree of discomfort that I want to get rid of’. To him *mens sana in corpore sano* did not make sense. He died at the age of 83 in 1939. It is interesting to see how long these psychoneurotics can live enjoying their ill health. Although some of them have been described as men of genius Keats was probably more correct in describing them as ‘men of achievement’. Pickering suggested the name of ‘creative malady’ for a disease with a useful end-product or at least a by-product.

W. R. Bett wrote a book in 1952 which he called ‘The Infirmities of Genius’ and differed from Pickering who had at least tried to find in psychoneuroses a common denominator. Bett, on the other hand, in giving the detailed life history of fifteen people, found a different disease in each. These people all suffered, as the general public does, from a mixed bag of diseases so that we can find no common bond linking them together. Two of his cases, however, were relevant to my way of thinking; one was John Keats, who had tuberculosis and syphilis; and the other was Charles Baudelaire, who openly admitted that his syphilis was the cause of his driving force.

Recently I received an article from Dr. Rentchnick in Geneva called ‘Les Ophelins Menent Le Monde’ – which could be loosely translated ‘if you want to get to the top it is best to be an orphan’. Rentchnick, it would appear, following the death of Monsieur Pompidou, decided to look into the family and personal history of some 350 people who had reached the top especially in the field of politics, army, arts and law. It is interesting and amusing reading, but when he brings in the kings and queens one must disagree. They reached their positions in no way through their own efforts ‘Some are born great, some achieve greatness, etc.’. I am afraid Oscar Wilde also would have disagreed with this. He said ‘For anyone to lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune, but to lose both looks like carelessness’.

## SYPHILIS AND GENIUS

Any one doctor over his entire professional life sees very few cases of general paralysis of the insane (GPI) and will in the years to come see still fewer. This interesting disease with its grandiose delusions can at times have been the stimulus for certain ideas that would not have been thought of otherwise, and in the list of names that follow in Appendix 2. I feel that there is a definite relationship between their achievements and the disease. The productive period of the disease is a short one before the inevitable final in insanity. As Thomas Osbert Mordaunt puts it ‘One crowded hour of glorious life is worth an age without a name’.

I remember one personal case very vividly. I was doing one of my few – alas too few – locums in general practice. This was in Co. Londonderry. I was called out to see a well-to-do farmer who had been for a time after leaving school a student in Edinburgh University before coming home to take over his father’s quite extensive estate. It was while he was a student that he had made contact

with the spirochaete. He was happily married, and on the day before I saw him he had told his wife that he was going to the local fair to buy some 20-30 cattle. Some hours later she was somewhat disturbed when she saw some 300 head of cattle being driven into the yard, and when he returned in the evening he told her that this was just the beginning and he hoped to have 2,000 or 3,000 more tomorrow. The onset of his grandiose delusions had been very rapid – he was in a Belfast nursing home next day, and in Purdysburn Hospital a few days later. The suddenness of this is well exemplified in another case often quoted by Sir William Thomson (Professor W.W.D.) – that of a well known high court judge – a man of fastidious tastes and immaculate manners – who, while hearing an important case in the High Court, had a sudden desire to pass his water. He proceeded to do this in a crowded court in full view of all concerned – and he was rapidly replaced in his post. Many people of my vintage in Belfast have in their homes paintings by an artist who turned out a great number of attractive oil paintings now much sought after. He had a short very productive very exciting spell during the stimulating period of his GPI before finally he died in the mental asylum.

When I was a student in London I remember a well known and brilliant ENT surgeon, who had been getting more and more eccentric and irrational, committing the final act which put him in the asylum. He was performing a mastoid operation and the ear flap kept falling back over his operation wound; after this had happened four or five times he could stand it no longer and cut the ear off. It is always said that Germany's chief thoracic surgeon had GPI and that towards the end of his life when a blood vessel began to spurt he used to try to catch the stream in mid air with his forceps rather than stop the bleeding point on the artery itself. On a more positive side, perhaps, is Cecil Rhodes, who it is alleged would never have had the magnificent conception of the Cape to Cairo Railway or the imagination to create Rhodesia without the help of the spirochaete.

GPI came as a rule some twenty years after the original infection: its victims were in the prime of life, often in responsible positions and often of high intelligence; sadly the end was a degrading one for such men. At first they were figures of fun with their delusions of grandeur and unpredictable impulses of behaviour, ending sadly, as one man put it 'As gibbering idiots awaiting a death of humiliation'. It must be remembered that GPI was a scourge in Victorian and Edwardian society and deaths from it ran into thousands each year. Wagner-Jauregg, later Wagner Von-Jauregg, in 1927 was awarded a Nobel prize for his original work on its treatment with malaria. This treatment was slow in being accepted as indeed was penicillin which replaced it. I suppose it is sad to think that in 1943 with the discovery of penicillin, this exhilarating disease was killed for ever. I am afraid I did not think of this when I was carrying out the pioneer trials in Sicily of research into the drug. Syphilis will go on, naturally, as long as man exists, but no longer will it show the late complications, since the disease can so easily be wiped out in its early stages. Have our doctors reduced the power of creativity and originality among the artists to the level of circles, squares, dots and blobs?

Dickson Wright in 1971 wrote a very good article on 'Venereal Disease and the Great' with a vast number of references. Discussing the church he points out that Cardinal Wolsey, and also three Popes, had been infected – no one is left unscathed, and this article has just a touch of pornography as one would expect from Dickson Wright. Regrettably, from our point of view, he does not separate gonorrhoea from syphilis, for I consider the former to have been an unproductive disease, doing neither patient nor his country any good whatsoever – no fringe benefits. It is said that Lord Cardigan was in considerable discomfort with his infection, which made him ride with less than his usual dash when he led the Light Brigade at Balaclava. Perhaps leading his men from behind may, in fact, have saved his life.

Syphilis has influenced the life and work of many well-known literary personalities. Daudet who, although he was also addicted to cocaine, and morphia, finally died from GPI. George Meredith also had GPI but struggled on to a ripe old age, going about in his bath chair drawn by his famous donkey 'Picnic'. Guy de Maupassant, described by some as 'a man of unbridled appetite' died of GPI at the age of 43, having stimulated many others to follow his example. Molière for the last eight years of his life was a chronic invalid from syphilis. He hated doctors and they hated him, but they got their own back on him, as he died in the theatre during the fourth performance of his famous play 'Le Malade Imaginaire' – a satire on doctors – when his syphilitic aneurysm ruptured. Heinrich Heine left Germany to live in Paris, where he changed from the Jewish religion and where he got his syphilis: he died at the age of 57 but had been bedridden for the last eight years of his life and was nursed through them all by his devoted mistress. He is said to have produced the most beautiful poems ever written in the German language. Oscar Wilde got his syphilis from a lady known as 'Old Jess' – said to be the only working harlot in Oxford when he was there: to her he dedicated a poem, which was very kind of him. He was disgusted with the mercurial treatment as it spoiled, he said, his nice teeth. Whether the cerebral abscess from which he died in Paris can be attributed to his syphilis or to the fall he had had in Reading Goal has never been solved.

Baudelaire was not only a syphilitic but an opium eater as well, and his most brilliant works were done under the influence both of the drug and the infection. It is often suggested that Dean Swift had cerebral syphilis to which his poem to Celia refers. In a play in London last year called 'Yahoo' it was openly stated that Gulliver's Travels could only have been conceived by a man with all the grandiose delusions of general paralysis of the insane. In the world of music Beethoven's deafness was said to have arisen from his having had syphilis. Schubert at the early age of 24 got syphilis but he in fact died quite young, most probably from tuberculosis and poverty, although some say that syphilis did shorten his days. Lorenzo de Ponte, the librettist of the Marriage of Figaro, had syphilis and later GPI and he actually died from it. Donizetti died relatively young at the age of 50. He had spent his last seven years declining slowly from GPI. Though he could still compose he could not any longer conduct. In his last stages the famous duet from Lucia de Lammermoor, which was one of his

masterpieces, was bawled into his ear as he lay dying in bed, but even that apparently produced no reaction.

Doctors did not often appear in the list of syphilitics. Finsen the Dane, a Nobel prize winner and famous for his lamp, died in 1904 from syphilis. I remember when this lamp was in daily use in The Royal Victoria Hospital for treatment of skin tuberculosis. Another was Von Behring – Koch's famous assistant, who died of GPI in 1917 at the age of 63. He will always be remembered for his famous work on diphtheria and tetanus. It is interesting to see that it is the artist, whether in music, writing, poetry, painting or sculpture, who appears most often. Coming to the arts we find Manet, Van Gogh – who it may be remembered cut off his ear shortly before committing suicide – also Gauguin who later went to Tahiti; Goya struggled on until the age of 82 when he died of a stroke. He had in all twenty children; sadly all of these died except one.

In the realm of sculpture we find an interesting article by Gleen Geelhoed (1968) on Cellini and his syphilis. In his own autobiography Cellini describes how he got his syphilis at the age of 28 when he took to live with him one of his most attractive models. He soon found that he had developed the 'French Disease'. When he was in quite an advanced stage of it he had an attack of malaria which gave him a prolonged but temporary improvement. Sadly he soon reverted to his grandiose delusions. He was treated with mercury, and in his famous statue of Perseus he included 'Mercury' at the bottom, perhaps linking together the cause of the sculptor's inspiration, and the cure.

In 1926 Springer wrote 'Die Genialen "Syphilitiker".' The name might have suggested 'The Genial Syphilitic' as indeed many are, in fact, some too genial. But this book deals with the relationship between syphilis, genius and culture. It is an interesting book, not very reliable, and in certain places shows muddled thinking; but its great value is that it gives a comprehensive list of notable people in the world of art, science, politics, law, church, state, medicine, royalty, all of whom have had the disease. Springer gives an extensive list and from this and other sources Appendix 2 has been compiled. Springer it will be seen includes such people as Job – who we know had many sorrows. Some will be sad to see Good King Wenceslaus (1378-1400) also on his list – perhaps one will sing this carol now with less than one's usual gusto. He also mentions King Philip II of Spain (1555-1598) and suggests that without his grandiose delusions of GPI he would not have had the courage or the audacity to risk his Armada against the British Navy.

## CONCLUSIONS

I hope I have been able with all these examples to prove to your satisfaction, as I naturally have to my own! that disease can be good for you. Are we better to have a long-lived community of bodily healthy people, nonentities and parasites, who are giving nothing to society, or a population with some exciting if eccentric personalities? Would a little tuberculosis among our politicians be a stimulus and give us some leadership rather than drab healthy mediocrity. It is sad if good health (so called) brings such a calamity with it.



My other contention was that syphilis has its advantages. Going back to the politicians it might be said that although they show no overt signs of syphilis yet in some ways we fear at times that they have delusions of grandeur. I know all of you who have had tuberculosis or syphilis are now much happier, and those who are fortunate enough, indeed, to have had both, will look on this as an added bonus. I suppose we should congratulate those who have reached the top of the profession without any of these external (or are they internal) aids.

#### APPENDIX 1

##### THE FOLLOWING SUFFERED FROM TUBERCULOSIS

Milton	Ann Brontë	Eugene O'Neill
Pope	Stevenson	Novalis
Shelley	Balzac	Klabund
Voltaire	Rousseau	Chekhov
Hood	Washington Irving	Llewelyn Powys
Keats	Hawthorne	W. E. Henley
Walt Whitman	Gibson	William Cullen Bryant
Elizabeth Barrett Browning	Kingsley	John Greenleaf Whittier
Francis Thompson	Ruskin	Maksim Gorki
Goethe	Emerson	Feodor Dostoevski
Molière	Cardinal Manning	Aubrey Beardsley
Channing	Lanier	Eugene Albrecht
Mérimée	Marie Bashkirtseff	Beranger
Thoreau	Robert Southey	Richard Lovelace
Descartes	Westcott	George Ripley
Locke	George de Guérin	Blackmore
Spinoza	David Gray	Joseph Rodman Drake
Beaumont	Amiel	Kirke White
Samuel Johnson	John R. Green	Adelaide Ann Proctor
Goldsmith	Robert Pollok	Henry Timrod
Sterne	Hannah More	H. C. Bunner
De Quincey	James Ryder Randall	John Sterling
Scott	N. P. Willis	Havelock Ellis
Leigh Hunt	John Addington Symonds	John Millington Synge
Jane Austen	Stephen Crane	Cicero has also been listed
Charlotte Brontë	Katherine Mansfield	among those who may have
Emily Brontë	Paul Laurence Dunbar	suffered from tuberculosis

#### APPENDIX 2

##### AUTHENTIC CASES OF SYPHILIS

Voltaire	Sebastian Roch Nicholass	Robert Reitzel 1898
Christopher Columbus	Chamfort 1791	Frederich Nietzsche 1900
Socrates 470-399 BC	Jean François De La Herpe	Oscar Wilde 1900
Caesar	1803	Paul Gauguin 1903
Caesar Augustus 63 BC-14AD	Napoleon Bonaparte 1822	Neils Ryberg Finsen 1904
King Wenceslaus 1378-1400	Ludwig Van Beethoven 1827	Otto Erich Hartleben 1905
King Charles VIII 1494	William Hyde Wollaston	Hugu Wold 1907
King Louis XII 1498	1828	Walter Leistikow 1908
King Francis 1515-1547	August Von Goethe 1830	Hans Jaeger 1910
King Philip II of Spain	Christian Dietrich Grabbe	Emil von Behring 1917
1555-1598	1836	Andreas Ady 1919
King Louis XIV 1643-1715	Nikolaus Lenau 1850	Hans Paasche 1920

King Louis XV 1715-1744	Ernest Theodor Hoffman	Paul Desthanel 1923
King William of Prussia	1822	Lenin (Wladimir Itjitsch
1840-1861	Heinrich Heine 1856	Uljanow) 1924
Pope Alexander VI 1492	Robert Schumann 1856	Woodrow Wilson 1924
Pope Julius II 1503	Arthur Schopenhauer 1860	René Viviani 1925
Pope Leo X 1513	Henri Murger 1861	Meredith
Ulrich Von Hutten 1523	Ferdinand Lassalle 1864	Thackeray
Benvenuto Cellini 1571	Edouard Manet 1883	Molière
Viscomte de Turenne 1675	Hans Makart 1884	Baudelaire
Marshall Von Sachsen 1750	Richard Von Volkmann-	
Jean Baptiste de Boyer 1771	Leander 1889	
Charles Von Rohan 1787	Karl Westphal 1890	
Honoré Gabriel Riqueti	Guy de Maupassant 1893	
Grad Mirabeau 1791	Alphonse Daudet 1897	

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